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Lou, Jackie Jia and Jaworski, A. (2016) Itineraries of protest signage: semiotic landscape and the mythologizing of the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement. *Journal of Language and Politics* 15 (5), pp. 612-645. ISSN 1569-2159.

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**Title:** Itineraries of Protest Signage: Semiotic Landscape and the Mythologizing of the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement

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### **Abstract**

The pro-democracy occupation of three commercial and retail areas in Hong Kong that lasted over two months in the fall of 2014 – known as the Umbrella Movement – created a myth of Utopia (Barthes 1984 [1954]). In this paper, we track the itineraries (Scollon 2008) and resemiotizations (Iedema 2003) of the protest signage to show how they mythologized the Movement by “branding space”, “regulating and disciplining actions”, and “unifying the voice of protest”. We argue that the semiotic processes and effects involved in the emplacement and widespread distribution of the protest signage were not only key in the mobilization during the Movement but also the emergence and reinforcement of a “new” Hongkonger identity in the long run.

### **Itineraries of Protest Signage:**

#### **Semiotic Landscape and the Mythologizing of the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement**

“Utopia is an impossible luxury for him: he greatly doubts that tomorrow’s truths will be the exact reverse of today’s lies.” – Roland Barthes

### **1. Introduction**

From 26 September to 15 December 2014, more than 10,000 people in Hong Kong joined a large-scale sit-in protest at three key sites across the city, now commonly known as the Umbrella Movement. At peak times, protests drew up to 100,000 people to the hot spots in the financial and commercial districts in Admiralty, Causeway Bay and Mong Kok. The grassroots protest was largely peaceful and exceptionally orderly. Although it failed to reach its main stated objective of bringing to the territory genuine universal suffrage, it quickly

came to be recognized as an unprecedented, epic event of great historical significance in Hong Kong's history. For many participants, the Umbrella Movement offered a glimpse and taste of Utopia, a sense of belonging to a community united by a shared ideal of democracy that drove them out of their homes to live together in the city streets for 81 days. Yet, Utopia is "an impossible luxury" not because it was short-lived, but because for Barthes's (1984 [1954]) mythologist, truths and lies are both myths, woven together by webs of signs.

The experience of Utopia was shared by the participants of numerous protests that have come to be known as Occupy and have swept over the globe since 2011, inspired and spearheaded by the events of the 15-M Movement in Spain, the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street, among others. Although driven by politically diverse agendas, the protests that have taken place around the world have transformed public spaces and generated new forms of social relationships. From the Egyptian Revolution in Tahrir Square to Occupy Wall Street, from Gezi Park in Istanbul to the Sunflower Movement in Taipei, to express their discontent with the status quo of capitalist greed, governments' welfare spending cuts, as well as to support pro-democracy initiatives, people appropriated various spaces of political, institutional, and historical importance as sites of dissent and debate, contestation and communication, disruption and dwelling. A new web of emplaced and online signs was crucial for the mobilization of activists, appropriation of urban spaces and spreading the demonstrators' postulates well beyond the confines of protest sites. The complex interplay of slogans, signage, speeches and other forms of social action has become the focus of recent linguistic and discourse analyses of protest messages in the global Occupy movement (e.g. Martín Rojo 2014a). One aspect of analysis has involved the mobility of signs as spatialized practices and performances resemiotized rapidly on photographs circulating from the physical spaces of their emplacement to the online spaces of social media (e.g. Chun 2014). Likewise, the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong witnessed intense activity of resemiotization of its

signage and imagery, frequently moving across offline, online and “back” to offline emplaced spaces of protest sites and further afield in the city, as well as mediatized well beyond the city’s boundaries (see also Ben Said and Kasanga 2016). Drawing upon the geosemiotic framework (Scollon and Scollon 2003) and Ron Scollon’s (2008) concept of “discourse itineraries”, this study examines some aspects of these multimodal processes of re-semiotization and re-emplacement of the Umbrella Movement protest signage and the role they played in the discursive construction of the mythology of the movement.

## **2. Background of the Umbrella Movement**

Officially named “Occupy Central with Love and Peace”, the civil disobedience campaign was launched in 2013 to pressure the Hong Kong government to guarantee genuine universal suffrage for the 2017 election of the Chief Executive. Initially, it was centrally planned to ensure order and non-violence and scheduled to begin on 1 October 2014, the National Day of the People’s Republic of China. However, when students stormed into the barricaded Civic Square on 26 September, and the police force used tear gas to deter protesters who gathered around to support them, the campaign was kicked off ahead of time by its organizers and quickly turned into a massive movement in which tens of thousands of protestors spontaneously occupied three major arteries of the city for more than three months. The umbrellas used by the protestors to protect themselves from tear gas and pepper spray became the namesake of the movement, its logo and a dominant symbol of protest signage.

In many ways, the Umbrella Movement was a more apt name for the protest in Hong Kong than “Occupy Central”. Its clear political objective – universal suffrage – differentiated it from other global Occupy movements, which were mainly galvanized by the discontent with capitalist greed. In Hong Kong, the movement did not begin in its financial district of Central as originally planned, but in Admiralty, in front of the building of the Legislative

Council, and expanded from there to Harcourt Road, a major traffic artery on Hong Kong Island, and arguably a much more direct challenge to the administrative and legislative power. Later on, independent sites by ideologically rival groups sprang up in Causeway Bay and across Victoria Harbour in Nathan Road in Mong Kok on the Kowloon Peninsula, two commercial and retail hotspots of the city.<sup>[Note 1]</sup> Interrupting the “normal” routines in these spaces, the protests also quickly generated new spatial practices, such as camping in tents, attending lectures in makeshift classrooms, organizing art exhibitions, and even growing plants and vegetables in the patches of soil seized from roads and sidewalks, thus creating a parallel city, a living Utopia, as has been the case with other movements around the world (e.g. Martín Rojo 2014b, Chun 2014).

### **3. Signs of Protest: Circulation and Reterritorialization**

Tilly (2006) underscores the social movements’ changing repertoires of protest to suit changing symbolic systems, evolving technologies, likelihood of repression, and new political opportunities.<sup>[Note 2]</sup> Yet, remaining conspicuously silent on the significance of social movements’ linguistic repertoires, he argues that

[p]erformances clump into repertoires of claim-making routines that apply to the same claimant-object pairs: bosses and workers, peasants and landlords, rival nationalist factions, and many more....Repertoires vary from place to place, time to time, and pair to pair. But on the whole, when people make collective claims they innovate within limits set by the repertoire already established for their place, time, and pair. Thus social-movement activists in today’s European cities adopt some mixture of public meetings, press statements, demonstrations, and petitions, but stay away from suicide-

bombing, hostage-taking, and self-immolation. Their repertoire draws on a long history of previous struggles... (Tilly 2006, 35)

Similar to other protests in the global Occupy movement, the Umbrella Movement was marked by an intense production and display of signs, posters, banners, flyers, stencils, graffiti, stickers, cartoons, comics, scrolls, road signs, petitions, photographs, postcards, personal messages, post-it notes, prayers, artworks (including sculptures and installations, children's art, chalk drawings, etc.), t-shirts, board games, newspaper pages, maps, flags, toys (e.g. toy umbrellas), jewelry (e.g. necklaces with beads and yellow ribbons), balloons, and a wide range of other ephemera. They covered up the façades of buildings, roads, bridges, fences, road signs, and other surfaces. Some were freestanding, others, like yellow ribbons, were small and highly transportable tokens of allegiance to the Movement pinned onto people's clothes, backpacks and other accessories. Alongside protestors' and sympathizers' bodies, camera crews, tourists, activists' speeches, musicians' and theatrical groups' performances, new architectural structures and repurposed spaces, they highlighted the potential of linguistic and semiotic landscapes to insert new voices and alternative narratives into the fabric of urban spaces (Martín Rojo 2014a; Papen 2012; Pennycook 2010; Rubdy and Ben-Said 2015; Stroud and Mpendukana 2009; Waksman and Shohamy 2016).

Whether for a few days as in Madrid or a few months as in Hong Kong, these protests took the form of encampment, and the protest signage played an indispensable role in appropriating public spaces. During the Umbrella Movement, streets were renamed (Figure 1)<sup>[Note 3]</sup>, tents were numbered (Figure 2) and identified with their occupants' names, and new pathways created (Figure 3). Temporary "institutions" such as first aid stations, bottled water and food supply stations, tent rental stations, study corners, libraries, postal services, battery charging services, rest areas ("living rooms"), galleries, shrines and temples sprang up (Figure 4). They were accompanied by information and directional signage, rules of conduct,

and courtesy notices. These installations (e.g. shelters and study places), addresses (e.g. Lennon Lane), street furniture (e.g. mail boxes), notices and the repurposing of public areas as front- and back-stage (intensely private) regions not only established the “Occupy City” (or “Cities”) as a self-governing jurisdiction on the protest sites (Hutton 2015), they also challenged the political, economic, and social orders represented by the toponyms, activities that they parodied and displaced. For example, road traffic was displaced by sleeping areas, Government Headquarters were re-labeled as “Triad Headquarters” (Figure 5), and some of the tents were named in a similar grandiose fashion (e.g. “L’Villa Hamitage”, Figure 6) as some luxury residences in the most expensive parts of the city (Jaworski and Yeung 2010)<sup>[Note 4]</sup>. As the spatial pattern of encampment grew more stable at the Admiralty site, a hand-drawn map emerged on a wall inside a nearby building that served as a temporary notice board (Figure 7). Its title “金鐘上河圖” (literally “A picture of Admiralty along the river”) alludes to the 12<sup>th</sup> century classical Chinese scroll painting “清明上河圖” (often translated as “Along the river during Qingming Festival, or “Peace reigns over the river”), famous for its detailed depiction of everyday street life. At another site in Mong Kok, a map (Figure 8) showed family-owned restaurants in the area to encourage protesters to support small businesses instead of the chain stores on the main road that they had occupied. Such tight overlaying of existing infrastructure with new directional, informational and symbolic signage, re-definition of permissible and non-permissible actions, and the emergence of a new interaction order (Goffman 1971) regulating the movement of people in protest sites resulted in the emergence of what Anfinson (2015) has aptly named a “paper city”. This reframing of key areas of Hong Kong echoes Martín Rojo (2014b), who, following Deleuze and Guattari (1993 [1980]), argues that “the conditions of production and circulation of linguistic practices [during Occupy movements] contribute to the ‘deterritorialization’ and ‘reterritorialization’ of urban space, by which protestors replace the traditional organization



and uses of space with their own beliefs, rituals, and communicative practices” (Martín Rojo 2014b, 625). In the next section of the paper, we examine how the process of reterritorialization is not only established but also reinforced by the circulation and recycling of protest signage.

Another commonality shared by the signage during the Umbrella Movement with other Occupy protests is its multi-scalar indexing of spaces as local, regional, national and global. At the local scale, as observed by Ho (2014) and Guilford (2014), many signs were written in Cantonese, the language spoken by more than 90 percent of the population in Hong Kong, yet often considered as *merely* a “dialect” when spoken and a “non-standard” variety when written (Hutton 2006). While Cantonese and Mandarin share a largely similar writing system and therefore are not always easily distinguishable, the protest signage in Figure 1, 18, 20, 24, 25, 37 contain clearly colloquial Cantonese words and expressions. For example, 係邊道(度) (hai bin do) was used to rename a road with the question “*where is* genuine universal suffrage?”, which would be 在那裏 (zai na li) in Mandarin (Figure 1). And when requesting people not to take close-up photos of students’ faces in order to protect their anonymity (Figure 24), the Cantonese expression 唔該晒 (m goi sai) was used to show appreciation instead of 謝謝 (xiexie), which could be either Mandarin or Cantonese. In fact, even the choice of language in the name of the Movement was heavily politicized, as in the example drawn from social media (Figure 9)<sup>[Note 5]</sup>, in which the Cantonese word for “umbrella” 遮 (“Ze”) is recommended in place of Mandarin 傘 (San), with the added pun of the Cantonese variant referring both to umbrella as an object and to the action of covering and protecting. As Martín Rojo (2014b) argues, the choice of an underrepresented language in protest signage can in itself be seen as a form of political action. Similar to the case of Egyptian Arabic in Tahrir Square (Abolezz 2014), the use of the vernacular not only created a humorous effect but also represented pride (Heller and Duchêne 2011) in a linguistically

distinct, local identity, in this case, that of a Hongkonger. Other signs, even though not clearly in Cantonese and/or mixed with English and other European languages, such as the references to the triads and naming conventions of luxury property developments, could only be fully understood by those who are familiar with the local context. At the other end of this linguistic-cultural spectrum there were signs written entirely in English and, occasionally, other languages. One of the first banners that appeared in news photo bulletins about the Movement carried the slogan “Soyez réaliste, demandez l'impossible” (“be realistic, demand the impossible”) from the Mai 1968 student revolution in France (Figure 10). Another banner hanging throughout the entire time of the protest from the pedestrian bridge over the Admiralty site read “You may say I’m a dreamer but I’m not the only one” from John Lennon’s song *Imagine*. This line, and its variants, together with portraits of John Lennon, toponyms such as The Lennon Wall or Lennon Lane, were very common throughout the protest alongside quotes and portraits from numerous other globally known politicians, revolutionaries, activists and artists. These intertextual practices positioned the Umbrella Movement as an inheritor of the ideals of the anti-establishment struggle of counter-culture, civil rights and pro-democracy movements. References to their glamorized and romanticized ideologies and achievements indexed the Hong Kong protesters as young but well educated, politically savvy and cosmopolitan.

The third common characteristic shared by the signs of the Umbrella Movement with other Occupy sites is their circulation across online and offline spaces. Social networks were often credited with its role in mobilizing these protests. During the encampment of Sol in Madrid, announcements were disseminated from a website as well as Twitter (Martín Rojo 2014b); in Tahrir, Facebook was hailed as Nassbook (people’s book) (Aboelezz 2014); and in L.A., participants made their own documentaries of the protest and uploaded them onto YouTube (Chun 2014). Similarly, the Umbrella Movement was not only a part of the daily

TV news in Hong Kong with a calendar counting its days, it was also streamed “live” by independent news outlets such as inmedia.hk and SocREC.org through their Facebook pages and YouTube channels. Additionally, countless individuals shared photos and videos through their personal networks on social media. Signage, then, inevitably became an important element of mediatization of the Movement for the consumption of local and global audiences. Chun (2014) has analyzed the trajectory of one particular sign in Occupy L.A., from the moment it was seen carried by a protester to its temporary location in the park, to its appearance in a participant video commentary on YouTube, and, finally, to the blog discussion that it triggered. Even though it is almost impossible to map the course of a sign completely, this method of tracing a sign in its various mutations shows clearly the interaction between texts, objects and actions in the process of resemiotization (Iedema 2001, 2003; Scollon 2008) shedding light on the textual, spatial and embodied relationships of protest discourse.

One notable phenomenon that we observed during the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong was the multiple lamination and re-emplacement of signage in the physical spaces of protest. In other words, the movement of signage was not unidirectional, typically from physical to virtual spaces, as appears to be the case in most other studies that have examined the semiotic landscapes of protest. In Hong Kong, the re-emplacement of signage in the encampment sites from online to offline spaces was prevalent. Therefore, in the remaining part of the paper, we try to answer two related questions: (1) What is the purpose of these circular itineraries and, to a degree, self-referential practices of signage emplacement? (2) What is the impact of multiple recontextualizations of written texts, still and moving images as well as objects and practices in the course of running a civil disobedience movement?

#### **4. Resemiotizing Protest Signage**

Defined as the social process during which “meaning shifts from context to context, from practice to practice, or from one stage of a practice to the next” (Iedema 2003, 41), resemiotization provides a powerful conceptual tool for discourse analysis. It shifts the narrow, analytic focus away from “language” in intertextual analysis. Instead of assuming





**Cantonese uses this word for umbrella**

**遮** ze1  
to block (v.)  
遮 차단(遮斷) 遮る

**傘** saan3  
umbrella (n.)  
傘 우산(雨傘) 傘

**umbrella (n.)**  
Only in Cantonese

**NOT THIS!**

**Translingual meaning**  
meaning that is shared by Japanese, Korean and Chinese languages

never used as a separate word in Cantonese

**Q: Then why do I see both on the street?**

**A:** Some HKers write in Written Chinese and avoid words that are unique to Cantonese, some (esp. the younger generation) write in pure Cantonese, many use a mixture of both. That's why you will see both characters







11

慶祝中華人民共和國成立六十五周年  
CELEBRATION OF THE 65<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF THE FOUNDING OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA



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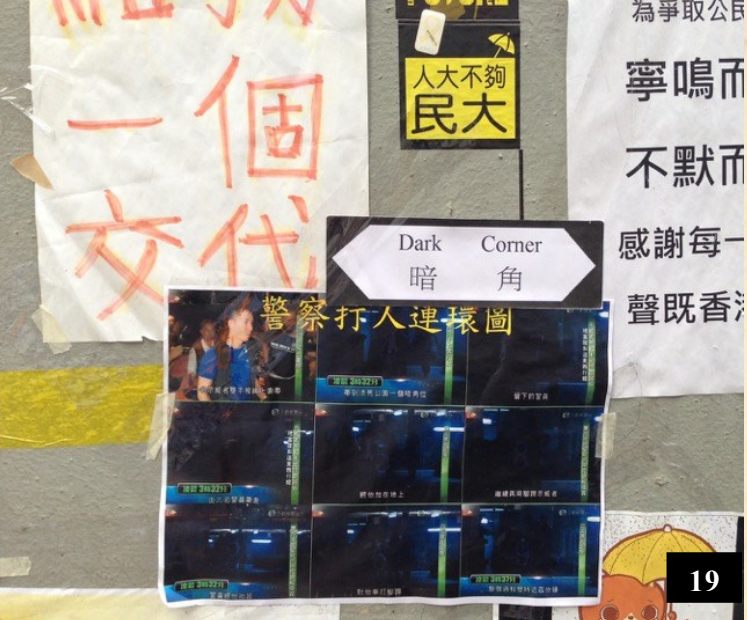


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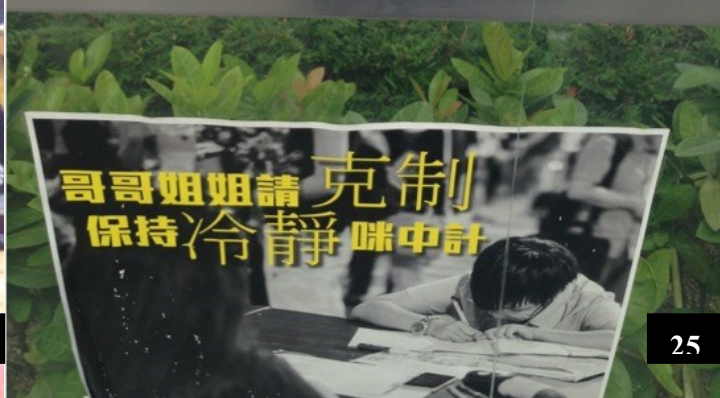
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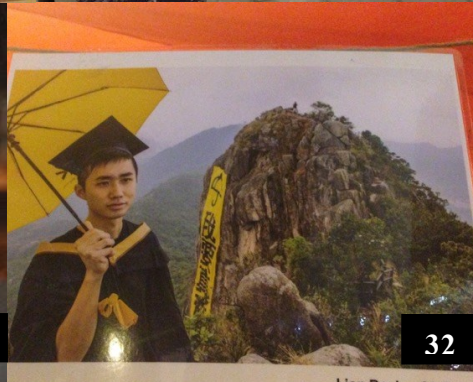
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direct relationship between texts, it examines how this relationship is “mediated by the actions of social actors as well as through material objects of the world” (Scollon 2008, 233). Resemiotisation also complements multimodality by emphasizing “the material and historicized dimensions of representation” (Iedema 2003, 5). In other words, the materiality of language is considered as an equally important mode of meaning alongside other semiotic modes of representation. And the movement of meaning from one modality to another, or from one materiality to another, in the process referred to by Kress (2010) as “transduction”, becomes a key site of creative semiosis.

Resemiotization, then, provides a fitting framework for research on protest signage. Usually hand painted on placards or banners and carried by protesters themselves, protest signs are inherently mobile “language objects” (Jaworski 2014). They are also intrinsically linked to actions on various levels (Lemke 2000; Scollon 2005), from the cardio-pulmonary timescale of marching and shouting slogans, to the solar time cycle of demanding particular political objectives such as electoral reform. Tracing the itinerary of protest signage then sheds light on how language, object, and action work together to construct “new realities” (Iedema 2003, 42).

#### *4.1 Branding Space*

While most Occupy movements are typically referred to the spaces which they took hold of (e.g. Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street; Occupy L.A.), the civil disobedience campaign in Hong Kong has been named after a highly symbolic object – the umbrella – that was first used by protesters to protect themselves from tear gas and pepper spray on 28 September 2014. Photographs of a man standing in a cloud of tear gas holding two umbrellas appeared on various international media. Xaume Olleros’s photograph of the scene made the cover of

*Time* magazine on 2 October 2014. The cover story by Hannah Beech called the movement “The Umbrella Revolution” (the center image in the triptych in Figure 11).

A day earlier, on 1 October 2014, the district councilor Paul Zimmerman opened up a yellow umbrella as an act of defiance during an official reception hosted by the HKSAR government to celebrate China’s 65th National Day (Figure 12). Captured on camera, the image showing a striking visual contrast between the yellow umbrella and the celebratory, “official” red background went viral. These acts of mediatization “iconized” the umbrella from a mundane object and a tool of self-defense to a symbol of the movement. Various versions of the schematic drawings of the umbrella appeared in poster designs (Figure 13). On Sunday, 5 October 2014, a 12-foot tall wood-block statue of a man holding out a yellow umbrella made by “Milk” – a 22 year old college student – was unveiled at the Admiralty site and instantly garnered much praise and attention (Figure 14). After the Umbrella Man, a canopy woven together with umbrella fabrics was hung from the footbridge over the protest site in Admiralty (Figure 15), Lego armies of protesters were built with umbrellas in their hands (Figure 16), yellow origami umbrellas decorated streets in Causeway Bay (Figure 17), and many more pieces of artwork and handicrafts appeared around the protest sites using the umbrella as a motif.

At the same time as the umbrella was being rendered symbolically and artistically, in another trajectory of resemiotisation, it was construed as a dangerous weapon by pro-China politicians and the police force. After Leung Che-cheung, a Legislative Council member, cited martial arts movies as evidence for the apparent use of the umbrella as an offensive weapon (Walker 2014). His remark was parodied in a political cartoon by Harry Harrison for the *South China Morning Post* as well as in YouTube clips of martial arts movie heroes such as Jet Li (<https://youtu.be/s3NVenA2E1o>) and Jackie Chan that were widely circulated on Facebook. These parodies then became emplaced again in the protest sites. A movie still of

Jet Li fighting with a yellow umbrella was pasted on the walls in the lobby of Admiralty Centre (Figure 18), right next to the protest site. The symbolic meaning of the umbrella as an object was thus contested and negotiated in these two divergent discourse cycles, of which we cite here only a few representative examples.

The overall effect of the ubiquitous presence of the umbrella, typically yellow-colored, was that of a logo branding the space of protest, endorsing other signage and being usable as a recontextualized souvenir, or token of displayed solidarity (akin to the yellow ribbon) that could be carried off the site. Umbrella posters, hand-drawn umbrella images on post-it notes, umbrella stickers, toys, mobiles, sculptures, Christmas decorations, and so on, were instantly recognizable and provided visual identity to the eponymous Movement they came to symbolize.

#### *4.2 Regulating and Disciplining Actions*

Numerous texts circulating during the Umbrella Movement indexed and recontextualized numerous actions and practices that took place as part of the unfolding events or were considered desirable or undesirable by the protesters. One event that triggered a long chain of intertextual references took place on 15 October 2014 when six police officers dragged an activist to a dark corner near the protest site in Tamar Park and kicked and beat him for four minutes. Their actions were caught on video, posted online as well as broadcast on Hong Kong TVB News. These media reports intensified the public's mistrust of the Hong Kong Police, which was expressed in a variety of texts. Screen captures of the videos were printed and posted in the form of a Hong Kong street sign "Dark Corner" (Figure 19). For a while, the Chinese name 暗角 ("dark corner") could be found on Google Maps, pinned at the exact location of the incident. A political cartoon (Figure 20) depicting Guang Gong, a historical figure representing justice and bravery, showing disapproval of the police actions appeared

both in Admiralty and Mong Kok, where protesters built a shrine for him. A less explicit reference to the event was seen in the comic drawing of a screen capture of Steve Hui Chun-tak (Figure 21), Chief Superintendent and the spokesperson for the Hong Kong Police, who had ironically praised the police force for their honesty and transparency (光明磊落) during the daily televised update just one day before the dark corner assault (the word 光明 in the phrase literally means “brightness”). Before the incident, Hui Sir, as many amicably and respectably called him, was *only* mocked for his formulaic use of English phrases such as “I will now recap in English” in his daily press briefing. After his attempt of bleaching the beating, his way of speaking was considered not only comical but treacherous.

Meanwhile, other signs served to encourage certain behaviors and practices at the protest sites. Recycling stations were created with garbage bags with cardboard labels (Figure 22); handmade signs marked entrances and exits on temporary steps made out of discarded pallets; signs on tents asked people not to step on them or wake the occupants up in case of emergencies such as police raids. Signage such as this came to be used by the world media (e.g. the BBC, *Wall Street Journal*, *The Independent*) to report the politeness and civility of the Hong Kong protesters. Two days into the protest, on 28 September 2014, Richard Frost, a journalist at Bloomberg, tweeted a photo of students doing their homework at the Mong Kok protest site, which was immediately picked up by several news outlets. At Admiralty, volunteers built for students a sheltered “study corner” with wooden desks and shelves (Figure 23). When the study corner became favorite with photographers, signs were posted requesting no use of flash and refraining from taking close-up pictures of the students’ faces (Figure 24). Soon, photographs of students doing their homework appeared on the walls of the study corner representing the activity inside. Some were used as background for signage requesting the students’ “older brothers and sisters” of the protest to “保持冷靜” (“keep calm”) (Figure 25).

These are just a few examples of texts and signage that regulated desirable actions – and their public image – among the protestors (orderliness, diligence, courtesy), and that disciplined the actions of the authorities (in this case, police brutality). The projection of the positive self-image and negative other-image is inevitable in any political conflict (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans 2013). For the protestors, it ensured the smooth running of the Movement and maintained order in the sites of protest. More importantly, however, it allowed them to police the boundaries between socially and politically acceptable and unacceptable behavior, hence clear delineation between “us” (the protestors) and “them” (the government).

#### *4.3 Unifying the Voice of Protest*

Among the many trajectories of signage observed in the study, one sign became particularly significant in terms of its numerous resemiotizations and widespread emplacement. The short text in yellow, block letters on black background read: “我要真普選” (“I want true universal suffrage”). It was accompanied by the umbrella icon above it and the hashtag #umbrellamovement below it. It first appeared on 23 October 2015 on Lion Rock (Figure 26), an iconic mountain ridge that resembles the head of a lion. The 10-floor high gigantic banner was brought up to the peak by 14 climbers dressed in Spiderman costumes and could be seen from many parts of the Kowloon Peninsula and the northern side of Hong Kong Island. The location of the banner’s first appearance is highly charged for Hong Kongers as it evokes “Lion Rock Spirit” which used to represent the resilience and unity of grassroots Hong Kong society in the face of hardship during the 1970s and 1980s while Hong Kong was still a British colony. The echoes and associations of the place with the struggle and determination of Hong Kong people for sovereignty were lost on no one. The banner was quickly dismantled by the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department on the grounds of

health and safety. However, by that time it had already been seen by many in its original location or on rapidly spreading photographs and videos circulated online.

The daring and humorous nature of the stunt captured the imagination of the protestors and their sympathizers. The symbolism of the banner's emplacement and its enormous size created a *spectacle of protest* was matched only by the massive iteration of smaller signage in the key demonstration sites of the Movement. The colossal scale of the banner not only invoked the urgency of its message; one could also see it as a metaphor of loud volume in speech (Harrist 2006; Schapiro 1994). The Lion roared.

In the following days, the banner or its photographs on Lion Rock appeared rapidly in key protests sites (Figure 27), on drawings (Figure 28), photographs of "imitation" sculptures (Figure 29), posters (Figure 30), stickers (Figure 31), graduation photos (Figure 32), and even on people's feline pets (Figure 33). Handmade banners in the same color and style appeared on campuses of the eight universities in Hong Kong (Figure 34), and in innumerable other locations. On 25 October, Apple Daily, a Chinese language newspaper with a daily circulation of 170,118, included a miniature 3D version of the banner with the newspaper, and on their website, with 2 million daily visits, posted a comedic video illustrating various creative use of the banner as a scarf, beauty pageant slogan, or a traditional calligraphic scroll typical of the Chinese New Year festival

(<http://hk.apple.nextmedia.com/news/art/20141025/18912198>). As a result, the banner flourished in the protest sites and across Hong Kong. It was attached to other objects, most notably the yellow umbrella (Figure 35), and was carried around by people (Figure 36). It accompanied the umbrella symbol (and the name of the Movement) as its default slogan. To draw on another marketing metaphor, it provided a pithy and powerful tagline on which the Umbrella Movement could "sell" itself as a beacon of democracy. It identified a "need" for

the Hongkongers premised on a historical agreement and human rights. The people were able to speak up with one voice.

### **5. Discussion: Mobility, Locality, and the Mythology of Hongkongers**

In the analysis above, we have traced several itineraries of key signs during the Umbrella Movement – the umbrella as a symbolic object, parodies of police actions, displays of the protestors' civil actions, and a mass distribution of a powerful slogan. While the mobility of signage during protests often contributes to the polyvocality of political discourse (Martín Rojo 2014b), we have demonstrated how the re-emplacement of resemiotized signs in protest sites is also capable of creating a sense of unified space, a set of resources available to protestors as indexes of a shared identity, unity and solidarity. Moreover, the multilayering of protest spaces with self-referential images of events, actions, sites, texts and images created a narrative and an account of the Movement. In other words, the process of resemiotization was harnessed in the service of the Movement creating its own Mythology.

In Barthes's (1984) analysis, myth is a second-order semiological system that is built upon language, the first-order system of the signifier and the signified. The word "umbrella" for example was first a sign consisting of the linguistic signifier referring to the "umbrella object", which was used by protesters for self-defense. During its subsequent resemiotizations, however, the sign became a second-order signifier referring metonymically to the movement in general. Whether in poster designs or art installations, the materiality of the umbrella ceased to *mean*. As Barthes (1984 [1957], 114) observes, "the materials of mythical speech (the language itself, photography, painting, posters, rituals, objects, etc.), however different at the start, are reduced to a pure signifying function as soon as they are caught by myth. Myth sees in them only the same raw material; their unity is that they all come down to the status of a mere language". In this meta-language, the meaning of the

original signifier is emptied and becomes a form that is ready to receive new meaning (Barthes calls this second-order meaning “concept”). This is also where the mythical meaning of a sign becomes more vulnerable and subject to contestation. In the pro-establishment lawmaker’s speech, an analogy was created between the umbrella used by the protesters for self-defense and the umbrella used by kungfu masters as a weapon. This retrospective intertextual chain of reference was in turn resemiotized in parodies of this remark and re-established the umbrella as a positive symbol by pointing out that the kungfu masters were indeed heroes for challenging the *status quo* on behalf of the people in the fictional world of cinematography. The power of myth grows with its reoccurrence until it becomes “natural” (Barthes 1984 [1954]), and the increasingly simplified form of the umbrella reduced to just a few lines made it possible for anyone to draw it anywhere and anytime. It was often observed in post-it notes on the Lennon Wall and was even seen on a woodblock prayer in a shrine in Tokyo just a few weeks after the end of the movement. In a similar fashion, the “Dark Corner” no longer pointed to an isolated incident but to police brutality in other similar incidents during the Movement; “I now recap in English” mocks not one policeman’s Hong Kong English but the inability of the entire police force to give a fair account of the events; instead of representing the resilience of the grassroots communities in Hong Kong, Lion Rock now stands for Hong Kong people in general. During this process of myth creation, even the meaning of the words “true universal suffrage” on the yellow banner became replaceable by any phrase to be filled in a blank on a customizable banner template “I want...” (Figure 37)

The circulated, recycled, re-appropriated signage, then, brings the mobile, global myth of Democracy back to the physical space of protest, adapts it to the local conditions, and cultivates an imagined order in a spontaneously organized movement reterritorializing, however fleetingly and illusorily, reclaimed spaces from the hegemonic grip of the state. Put differently, the re-emplacement of resemiotized signage contributes to the production of



locality, defined by Appadurai (1996) as “a structure of feeling”, emerging from the interaction between local subjects and local space. As shown in the analysis of semiotic trajectories in this paper, these are not particular spaces in the city that become representative of the Movement, but the meditational means styling and branding these spaces and the people moving through them: the umbrella, a mobile object, a slogan fossilized in a particular multimodal display and attached (literally and in the memory of its animators) to a symbolic location, itself no longer a physical location but a mythical point of reference. It is thus not surprising that among the myriad of signage so many examples appellate (Althusser 1971) the protestors as “香港人” (“heunggongyan”, “Hongkonger”) (Figure 38).

The global Occupy movements have often been criticized for lacking clear political aims, but as Martín Rojo (2014b) argues, they were still revolutionary in transforming old ideologies and generating new practices. By contrast, the Umbrella Movement had a clearly defined aim. Yet, as this analysis has shown, by circulating and re-emplacing signage into the physical space of the protest, it also engaged many people in the territory in the construction of an ever more, politically self-aware, imagined community of globally inter-connected locals – the Hongkongers.

## Notes

1. The three protest signs were marked by slightly different ideological positions, and a degree of rivalry and animosity between their demographically divergent groups of protesters. The differences were discernible in the semiotic landscape of the three sites, despite many shared linguistic and visual tropes. Our analysis is based largely on data collected at the Admiralty site. A more detailed analysis of the differences across the three sites exceeds the scope of the present paper.
2. We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this reference to us.

3. Unless otherwise noted, all images were taken on the protest sites by the authors.

Figure 9: HKU Cantonese's Facebook Page

Figure 10: AFP for South China Morning Post

Figure 12: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-29446266>

Figure 26: Hong Kong Spider Man for Apple Daily

4. Some of the postulates of the Umbrella Movement were economically-based. In particular, the predominantly young protesters wanted to draw the governments' attention to the exorbitant house prices in Hong Kong making it impossible for most young adults to move to their own flats. Alluding to the Hong Kong exclusive residential areas in the tents' signage was most likely an ironic reference to the prohibitive property prices.
5. Image courtesy of Aaron Anfinson.

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